

By the Kansas State Historical Society

Famous Kansan



Hattie McDaniel
1895-1952

When Hattie McDaniel was very young she loved to sing. She was born in Wichita. She sang in her church choir. Her family went on tour to sing and perform. People came from far away to hear McDaniel sing. Hattie McDaniel was one of the first African American women to sing on the radio. McDaniel liked to dress up for her performances. She got the nickname "High Hat Hattie" because of the fancy clothes she often wore.

McDaniel loved to perform on stage. When she first became an actress, there were very few roles for African Americans. At first the only roles McDaniel could get were as a maid or a servant. But McDaniel kept trying. She had roles in more than 300 films, but her name was not listed on many of them.

Hattie McDaniel did get one very important role in a film. She was in the famous film *Gone With the Wind*. For her performance as Mammy she won an Academy Award. McDaniel was the first African American to win an Academy Award. She wanted people to see African Americans as talented. She wanted all of her characters to be strong and independent. She refused to speak in a dialect the way most African American actors were forced to do. McDaniel fought racism and discrimination to change people's opinions of African American actors.



Hattie McDaniel worked hard to change things for other African American actors who would follow her. She became the star of a radio show, *The Beulah Show*. The show was so successful that it became a television show as well. By that time, though, McDaniel was very sick. She was not able to play the role of *Beulah* on television after the radio show ended.

Some people did not agree with what Hattie McDaniel was trying to do. But her work changed many people's ideas of what roles African Americans could play. When McDaniel was not making films, she was raising money to help young African American actors.